DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 911 FL 018 265

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TITLE Teaching English Literature to Iraqi Students of Translation: A Study in Cultural Overlap.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (23rd, Warwick, England, March 31-April 3, 1989). Type is often faint and of uneven quality.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Arabic; Communication Skills; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Context; *English (Second Language); *English Literature; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; Poetry; Skill Development; Teaching Methods; *Translation; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Iraq

ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching English literature to first-year students of translation, emphasizing literature as a vehicle of culture, of literary experience, and for development of communication skills in English as a Second Language, is recommended based on one teacher's experience at an Iraqi university. Literature is seen as a means of helping students to gain insight into both their own culture as well as other cultures. Translation from English to Arabic is used as a means of making comparisons of the different cultures. In the beginning, the focus of this approach is placed on cultural similarities, and later on differences in outlook. The roles of plot, style, structure, vocabulary, figurative language, and writing conventions for different genres are examined to enhance student exposure to the literary experience. Language skills are taught through literature by discussion of authors' methods, motivations, and experiences. In particular, poetry is used to help students assimilate aesthetic values in literature. The approach is intended to stimulate both cultural understanding and mastery of linguistic codes. (MSE)

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Teaching English Literature to Iraqi Students, of Translation: a Study in Cultural Overlap

Dr. A. S. Al-Azzawi

1. Introduction :

Over a period of two years in teaching a course in English literature (Short Stories, Drama, Essay-writing and Poetry) to first-year students in Translation Department I have developed my own three-dimensional approach to teaching English literature, as a vehicle of culture, literary experience and for development EFL-communicative skills.

A pre-test as well as teaching experience has shown that those aspects are what Iraqi students of translation would require from the course in English literature in the first year of their study.

The students who are admitted to Translation Department are graduates of Iraqi Secondary Schools and their equivalence from other Arab Countries who have achieved 80 out of 100 marks in both Arabic and English Languages in the Ministerial Examination. When interviewed the students showed that they considered translation an important professional skill.

The teaching of other English-related subjects-translation into Arabic, English Grammar, English Phonology, English Comprehension, English Composition and dictation-

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in the first year is intended to raise students level up in basic language skills. The four-year course in the Department covers English novel (2nd year), English drama (3rd year), and other topics such as French language, comparative grammar (English and Arabic), essay and precise writing, linguistics, lexicography, Arabic/English/Arabic translation (written, at-sight, consecutive and simultaneous interpretation).

However, the English literature course I taught to the Iraqi student of translation aimed to achieve the following:

i. to orientate the students to English culture for the purpose of learning English as an international means of communication as far as translation is concerned.

ii. to aid the students to reflect upon and refine their literary experience; and

iii. to develop the students' language skills - oral and written as far as translation is concerned.

2. Cultural Overlap and Translatability:

Culture refers to the conception of what constitutes excellence in art, literature, manners and social institutions (Lyons, 1981 : 301).

Every society has its own culture; and different subgroups within a society may have their own distinctive subculture.

Given that language competence is culture dependent and translatability depends mainly on the degree of cultural overlap and cultural diffusion as they reduce semantic differences between languages (Lyons, 1981 : 325), assimilating the culture of the speakers of the target language should be one of the main objectives of any translation course especially when the source and target languages have two radically dissimilar cultural and structural norms. Translation starts with meaning and ends with meaning (Newmark, 1982 : 26). Full understanding of meaning that is encoded by the structure of the target language comes only with a full understanding of the culture in which it operates (Op. cit, 324). Therefore, the closer the cultural overlap between the two languages, the better the translation. (Newmark, 1982 : 47).

Translation has been of a great aid in transmitting culture eversince people, countries, languages, and cultures have been in contact with one another. The Romans in 55 B.C. translated a lot of Greek cultural elements. The Arabs carefully studied Greek thoughts and translated into Arabic many outstanding Greek writings on medicine, Astronomy and philosophy during the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th Centuries. They also translated some Indians and Persian texts into their own language, and the Indian and the Persian translated

a lot of the Arabic books into their own languages (Al-Jumaili, 1986 : 487). Nida (1964:13) states that Baghdad became an important centure for translation in the 9th and 10th Centuries. In the 9th Century King Alfred (reign 871-99) had translated or caused to be translated a number of Latin texts into English (McGure, 1980 : 50). The Toledo School of translation in Spain translated a lot of Greek and Arabic learning into European languages in 12th Century when the West came into contact with the Arabs in Spain (Newmark, 1982 : 3, 1988 : 7). Roger Bacon (1214-92) talked about loss in translation and chaucer (1340-1400)discussed accuracy in translation (Op. cit: 52-3). In the 19th Century German culture was absorbing Shakespeare (Nida, 1964 14).

Conference interpretation began for the first time as a profession in Europe after the second world war in 1919 when French lost its privilege of being the only language of diplomacy. Diplomatic negotiations were then conducted in both English and French simultaneously (Herbert, 1976: introduction).

The 20th Century has been caused the age of translation after the setting up of the United Nations organization. The importance of translation has also been enhanced by the increase in scientific advancement, scientific and literary books, trade, and the increase in world communication for the purpose of more co-operation and propagation

of peace among nations. In effect, translation has opened new doors for international thought in all walks of life as people all over the world are in need to keep abreast with the rapid development in science and arts.

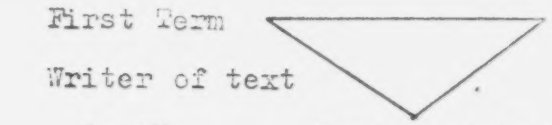
3. Translation and Teaching Literature:

Translation and literature are interrelated as both are concerned with transmitting culture between nations. Steiner (1975:257) states that translation acquaints people with foreign cultures by rendering foreign matter into their culture in a way which is scarcely noticed.

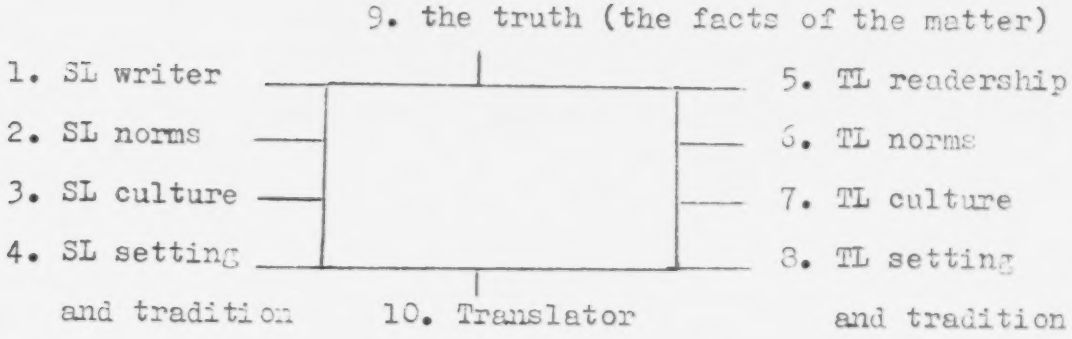
3.1 Translation Process:

Catord (1965 : 20) defines translation as the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). To Nida and Taber (1969 : 12) translation is ' reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style ' . Newmarks (1988 : 5) sees translation as ' rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text. " However, the aforementioned definitions imply that there are two important questions to be answered before the translator gives a precise and accurate rendering:
first, to which of the parametres in figure 1 below would the translator be more faithful-text, writer or reader-, (Nida, 1964 : 161), and second, how would the translator

make a balance among the factors in figure 2 which impinge semantically on the text?, as the text is pulled in ten different directions as follows (Newmark, 1988, 4)



(Figure 1)



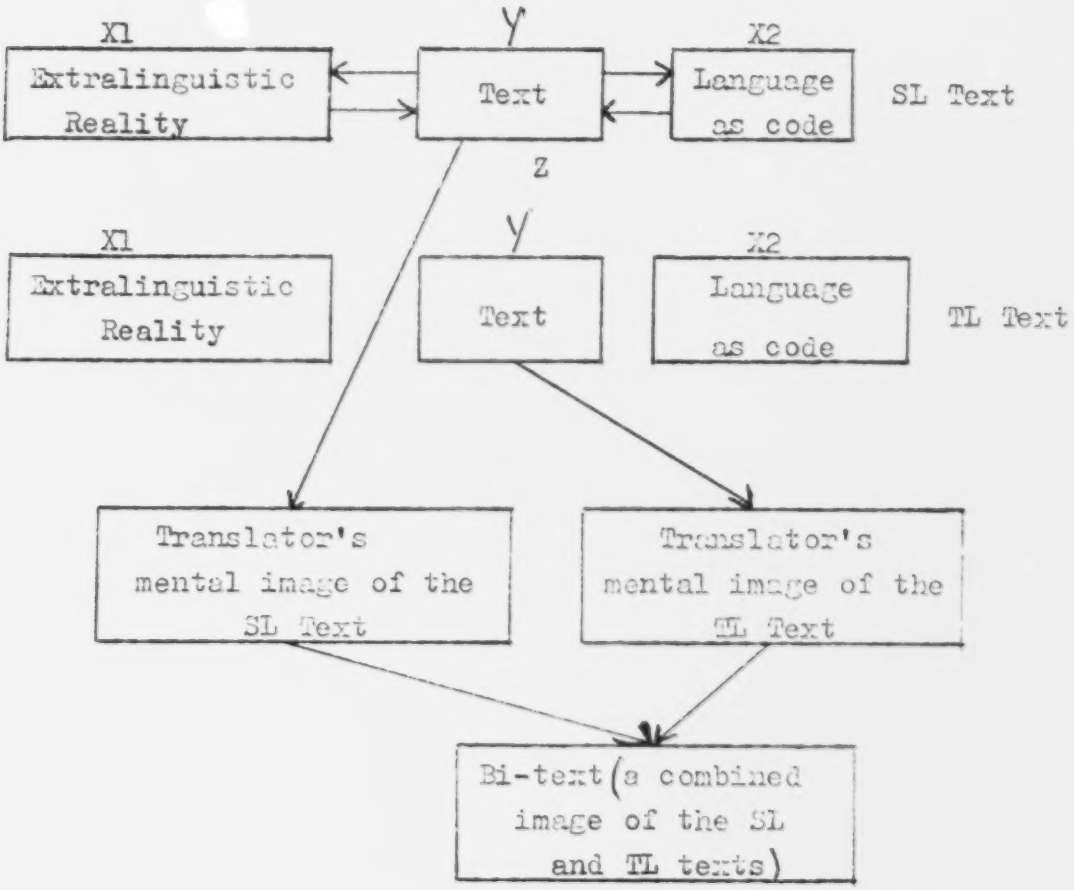
(Figure 2)

Texts are divided into three types, expressive, informative and vocative. The first type is writer-centred as in literary works, the second type is text-centred as in scientific texts, and the third type is reader-centred as in Journalistic texts (Newmark, 1982 : 13).

As far as literary texts are concerned the mental image which forms the underlying structure of the final version depends on the ' extralinguistic reading ' of the text in both the source and target language which is mainly reflected in the SL and TL cultures and SL and TL setting and tradition

as seen in Figure 3 which is a combination of Newmarks (Ibid) and Harris's (1988;8) bi-text. ' Bi-text ' refers to the language image of the source text and target text which the translator holds as the two texts co-exist in the translator's mind at the moment of translating.

Figure 3



The above process is called mental or cognitive translation (Newmark, 1982 : 40) and it is done before the reproduction of the TL text. Differences in translations are the result of the translator's mental images of the SL and TL texts which are influenced by his background in

the cultural norms of the source and target languages as well as his mastery of the language structures of the two languages.

3.2 Teaching Literature as a vehicle of culture:

People's behaviours in various situations in life are greatly influenced by their cultures which constitute customs, actions, attitudes, values and ways of thinking. What is considered right in a particular situation in a particular culture may not be accepted in a similar situation in another situation in another culture (Nasir, 1980 : 112). This may imply that cultural orientation which can well be achieved in assimilating the literature of the speakers of the foreign language, will help a lot in mastering the use of language and behaving appropriately in the society of the native speakers of the language.

In addition to its being a window to the culture of the foreign language, literature can help students get more insight in their own culture as each one would pave the way to understand and assimilate the other due to the universal characteristics they may share. I have noticed that the students who had a good background in Arabic literature participated actively and creatively in class discussion when universal-literary values were dealt with.

Given that language and culture are inseprable as language is a guide to social reality and different

societies indicate different lines (Sapir, 1956 : 69), and every society holds certain ideas about life, man and even good and evil which its people take for granted.

Culture will constitute problems for foreigners, particularly when it is different from their own, in rendering SL texts into their language.

The aforementioned proposition was substantiated by what I saw in the students' performance in the pre-test, during the teaching of the "English Literature" course, and in fourth-year students' performance in ' Theories of Translation ' course. In this latter course, students deal with theoretical aspects of translation and practise translating various types of texts-journalistic, literary, historical, religious, low and scientific. I have found that the main problems students faced were those language aspects which were rich with cultural elements-metaphors, idioms, proverbs, puns, jokes, journalistic English, acronyms, administrative institutions and the like.

However, in teaching English literature to Iraqi students of translation I developed an approach whose aim was to orientate Iraqi students to English culture in a way which I felt could develop their English / Arabic / English translation skills. Emphasis was placed on cultural similarities first for the purpose of orientating Iraqi students to English culture as I found that most of the students

knew very little about English culture, in fact, some of them had misconceptions about English culture. This might be due to the kind of English they have been exposed to in secondary schools (whose aim is to teach grammatical points and pronunciation) non-orientation of the English programme in secondary schools to English literature, and students' incompetence in English to assimilate English culture via English films shown on the Iraqi television.

As far as cultural differences are concerned through out the course, emphasis was placed on approximating outlooks rather than the other way round. For instance, the sacrifice of ' the prince ' and ' the swallow ' for the sake of the poor people of the city in Oscar Wilde's story "The Happy Prince" (see Eckersley, 1959 : 63) was emphasized and compared with the sacrifice of the Iraqi people in defending their country, morals and principles. Instances of sacrifice for a good cause can be noticed in every nation. People sacrifice for people they love. The prince could not see the misery of his people because he was separating himself from them. He was busy in entertaining himself in his castle. This may imply that good leaders should mix with their people in order to know them well and improve their living conditions and fulfil their aspirations. Extracts such as the following were fully discussed, analysed textually and translated into Arabic.

"Dear little Swallow", said the prince, "You tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no mystery so great as misery. Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell what you see, there."

Selfishness was represented by the town councillors who pulled down the statue of the prince and threw its heart away on a dust-heap, and who quarrelled because each one of them wanted a tatue of himself to be put in its place. (Ibid : 65).

"We must have another statue, of course." he said "and it must be a statue of myself".

"Of myself", said each of the Town councillors, and they quarrelled.

However, dissimilarities were not neglected in order to put the students in the true picture of the culture of the speakers of the second language. For instance, causes behind despair in life might not be the same in the West and the Arab World. The way sons, people and institutions care for the aged in the West and the Arab World may not be the same. Committing suicide in the Arabic-Islamic society is considered a religious crime which brings shame to the family.

The idea of the oneness of God for all people of the world, and that good, loving and caring people are blessed by God are stressed whenever they occured in the literary texts. These are some examples :-

i. Cleanness of soul and place in Heminguay's "A clean well lighted place".

ii. God blessed the Happy Prince and the Swallow and ordered that they be taken to Paradise.

"Bring me the two most precious things in the city" said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

"You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me". (Eckersley, 1959, 65).

iii. God blessed Abou Ben Adhem for being a man of peace who loves his fellow-men.

Other ideas which were touched upon were those related to people's images of their limited innerselves as in the case of how greed and ambition can destroy people's life as shown in Barrie's one act play ' The Will ' and Callaghan's story "The Snob". (see the National Council of Teachers of English, 1975).

However, I have noticed that the discussions and comparison of English literature with that of the students' have given them deeper insights into their own literary traditions. What was of interest to me was that in their discussions students tended to stress points of similarity between their culture and that of the target language a process which would have positive attitudes towards the

literature and culture of the target language which in turn lead to sharing of human relationships which civilized nations should experience nowadays for the sake of world peace and co-operation among nations.

3.3 Teaching Literature as a vehicle of Literary Experience:

In addition to its being a vehicle of culture and language material, literary work can be taught for its own sake, i.e. for gaining more insight into human experience, human art and artistic and aesthetic values of the literary experience. Being highly enjoyable and interesting in its own right, literature can stimulate foreign language learners to devote more time to this interesting experience which would in turn expose the students to more cultural and linguistic codes of the foreign language.

It's to be noted that art in general has a communicative purpose as it is to a greater or lesser extent allegorical, figurative, metaphorical and a parable. Figurative language only becomes meaningful, if it is recreated in the figurative language of the target language and its culture (Newmark, 1982 : 45). This implies that through translation the students will be acquainted with the aesthetic value and artistic nature of the foreign language.

Students however, dealt with discussions related to writing stories and how plot, style, structure, vocabulary and figurative language play an important role in story telling and how a good story can give the reader a sense of

the actual experience. Class discussions also covered play writing, and how stage directions define time and plac (change of pictures of kings, furniture indicated change of time in Barrie's one-act-play ' The Will '), (see the National council of Teachers of English, 1975) and describe characters and even analyze them for audiance; and how the play has special restrictions which are not imposed on the novelist or short-story writer. As far as poetry is concerned class discussions covered how each poet reflects his own life experience in his poem (Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death", (Ibid) and Wordsworth's "lucy". (Eckersley, 1959) and how poetic themes can change by time.

3.4 Teaching Literature as a Means of Developing Language Skills:

Language is never static as it is always adjusted to new uses, or reshaped for old uses. Vocabulary in particular is subject to innovation in this way. This can be noticed in literary work. Litrary language multiplies the possibilities of variation in a complex way, allowing departures from ordinary language in accord with the conventions of literary language (Turner, 1973; 16).

Given that the translator of literary works has to grapple not only with the cultural norms of the source language but also with structural differences between the two languages (Duff, 1981 : 12), mastery of both the

cultural and structural of both languages are of importance for a good rendering.

I have noticed, through the course, that teaching English literature has developed students' linguistic abilities. In fact the four language skills reading, writing, listening and speaking have been developed.

During the course students were asked to read English stories at home and write notes about each story - they had to write down - author's name, year of publication, the main events of the story, new vocabularies; and how many stories they were able to read per week. I have found that students were motivated to read more stories as they were allowed to talk about what they read and handed in summeries of what they had read. They were also required to talk about the lesson they learned from each story in class.

In teaching English poetry I have found that the students were very much interested in the discussions of the poet's bibliography, the poem's backgrounds and the causes behind writing the poem.

I have found that discussions of the poet's life helped a lot in student's understanding of the theme of the poem. This was clearly noticed in Frost's poems "The Road Not Taken", and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", Dickinson's (1930-1886) poem "Because I could not stop for Death", and Wordsworth's (1770-1850) poem "Lucy" which they memorized by heart.

Finally I feel that concentration in teaching English poetry to Iraqi students of translation should be placed on helping the students to get acquainted with the English poetry, the famous English poets, the music and metrical patterns of English verse and how re-creation of sense experience can be achieved in English poetry with words which are the poet's tools. Such a type of student's involvement in English verse would help them a lot in assimilating English poetry and its aesthetic value as a basis for effective renderings.

Through objective analysis and argumentation of themes in Barrier's play and the poems discussed in class, the students did have enough time to practise their English. Fluency was emphasized rather than accuracy at this stage so that students would not be inhibited from using English freely. Fluency in English is a skill which Iraqi students are badly in need of.

In collaboration with the university audio-visual centre and the university language centre, the students had access to see, discuss and comment on ten language units - the B.B.C. series "people "You meet"- (20 minutes each), and ten units from the American 'Switch on', Valley Forge Hotel, Nelson Filmscan, 1982, (10 minutes each). It was a very interesting experience for the students. Viewing would lead to a better understanding of culture when it is followed by objective discussions.

The type of questions used in class to develop students language skills and to give them more insight in English literary works were as follows (see, Tollefson, 1989 : 8).

Compare

Contrast

list

paraphrase

classify

Divide

Summarize

How is ..... different farm...

How is ..... the same as

Is it right that .....

Do you agree ....

I have noticed that the teaching of English literature in the way discussed has developed the students' English language skills and translation skills in the following areas:

i. confidence in speaking.

ii. development of fluency.

iii. development of vocabulary.

iv. development and expression of ideas.

v. ability to discuss, discriminate and evaluate literary work

vi. improvement of students writing skills in English

vii. rendering which is closer to the original.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study is to stress the significance of teaching English literature to Iraqi university students studying translation as a specialized skill.

Language and culture are as inseparable a unity as body and soul. This implies the significance of assimilating the culture of the target language in any EFL course. Given that literature is a vehicle of culture, and translatability involves a degree of cultural overlap and cultural diffussion, a course in English literature in a learning situation where mastery of both English and standard Arabic is the main concern of the course should have cultural orientation as a main objective. I feel that correct transfer from one language into another depends mainly on understanding as well as mastery upon their structural codes.

Finally, the aims of teaching English literature in Translation Departments should be questioned.

Language-teaching techniques which would lead to more cultural overlap such as video films are to be haevily used. More emphasis is to be placed on modern English literature. Courses related to stylistics and comparative literature- English / Arabic - are needed. Due emphasis is to be placed on Arabic literature and developing oral English and standard-Arabic skills for the purpose of enhancing students' Arabic/ English/Arabic stimultaneous interpretation.

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